McNamara's Warning

As World Bank president throughout the 1970s, Robert S. McNamara spent much of his time wading through Africa's economic morass. While in office he avoided public comment on the continent's single most explosive political issue: the building black-white confrontation over South Africa's unyielding apartheid. But McNamara has retired—and last week he attacked official segregation on South Africa's home ground. Unless repealed, apartheid "will eventually lead to a catastrophic racial conflict," he told an audience at the University of Witwatersrand. "South Africa . . . will become as great a threat to the peace of the world in the 1990s as the Middle East is today."

McNamara's scenario for disaster was based on South Africa's entrenched racial injustice: a rigid system of laws that denies blacks political rights, segregates them and bans them from decent jobs and adequate social services. As young blacks turn to revolutionary violence—an estimated 8,000 have left so far for military training abroad—the Soviet Union can anticipate burgeoning opportunities to meddle in southern Africa, McNamara said. He added that black frontline states, growing in confidence and economic strength, will step up support for antiwhite guerrilla forces. "A violent explosion appears inevitable," he concluded—probably within 5 to 10 years.

Any racial war in Africa is bound to damage U.S. interests. "Many Americans—both blacks and whites—will have intense personal feelings about the issues," McNamara predicted; Washington will "almost certainly not find it morally or politically possible to support the white South Africans." In retaliation, Pretoria might cut off supplies of chromium, manganese and other strategic minerals. McNamara suggested that the West prepare for that possibility by building up mineral stockpiles. To defuse the crisis before it reaches such international proportions, he urged "liberal South African business leaders" to promote economic reform. More importantly, he called for a "negotiated" settlement providing "full participation in genuine political power" for blacks and protection for whites against "a winner-take-all form of majority rule."

McNamara's university audience greeted his words warmly, and the English-language Cape Town Argus editorialized that "his somber analysis is shared by many informed South Africans." But the Afrikaans-language newspapers buried McNamara's warning on inside pages. Not surprisingly, Pretoria refused comment. "We have of course heard all this sort of thing before," said one government spokesman. Outsiders have been beard-ing Pretoria on the dangers of a racial explosion since at least 1960, when British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan warned that "winds of change" were transforming Africa. McNamara's contribution ranked among the more powerful—and those who agree with him could only hope that repetition would drive the message home.

FAY WILLEY with bureau reports

Scenario: An explosion in 5 to 10 years

Mark Peters